

Mudgee ANZAC Day Address – 2010

To everyone who is assembled here today – welcome & thank you for coming. I wish to particularly acknowledge any veterans as well as relatives of veterans who are no longer with us.

ANZAC Day is a special day for Australians & I am privileged to have the opportunity to address you on this occasion.

There are 3 stories I want to recall today. One is a story of a victory won by a group of Australians in WW1; the other is the story of great sacrifice by a single airman in WW2; & the final story took place this week at Mudgee Public School.

The reason I tell you these stories today, is so that we who are fortunate to live in this amazing country, will not simply remember, but will also give thanks for the sacrifices that were made by the men & women who served in the many theatres of war in order that our great grandparents, our grandparents, our parents, our children & our children's children, may live in a society which has the freedom which Australia enjoys today.

However, it is even more than this, for, as we hear these stories, I challenge each & every one of us to consider the implications of such actions upon our lives, as happened with those involved in my third story.

The year was 1918. On the 31st May on the Western Front in France, an Australian, Lieutenant General Sir John Monash, took over command of the Australian Corps. The Australians would not only fight together for the first time, but even more importantly, they would be under Australian command.

South of the Somme was the small village of Le Hamel. This was a prime piece of real estate that was held by the Germans. Behind the town was a hill which gave the occupants a great view & position from which to observe & press forward. The Allies needed this piece of land. In June 1918, Monash put forward a meticulously detailed plan to capture the village of Le Hamel. Central to his attack was the use of all arms available to him – tanks, artillery, infantry & aeroplanes. This combination was quite revolutionary at the time, for as Monash said,

“...the role of the infantry was not to expend itself upon heroic physical effort, not to wither away under merciless machine gun fire, not to impale itself on hostile bayonets, but on the contrary, to advance under the maximum possible protection of the maximum possible array of mechanical resources in the form of guns, machine guns, tanks, mortars & aeroplanes.”

Another special piece of information about this offensive was that 4 newly arrived American companies fought alongside & under the command of Monash. With this in mind, Monash set the date for the battle to be the 4th July 1918 (American Independence Day).

The attack began at 3:10am. Monash planned that their victory would take just 90 minutes. The entire action was over in 93 minutes with all objectives successfully achieved! About 2,000 Germans were killed or wounded & 1,600 were captured together with a vast quantity of weapons. Australian casualties were in the order of 1,400 with a further 100 Americans being killed or wounded.

Collectively, the Australians had not only once again proved themselves, but their action played a major role in bringing victory for the Allied troops & an end to WW1.

My family & I had the privilege of visiting Le Hamel in November 2005. There is a wonderful Australian monument that has been erected on the hill just outside the town. The story of the Australian victory is told there to this day.

The year now is 1942. On the 28th November, 26 year old Flight Sergeant Rawdon Middleton took off to bomb the Fiat factory in Turin, Italy. Before joining the RAAF, Middleton attended school in Dubbo; had been a jackaroo at Leewang Station, which is a property between Parkes & Condobolin; & he learnt to fly at Narromine.

On this, the night of his 29th operation, Middleton and his crew arrived above Turin after a difficult flight over the Alps, due to the low combat ceiling of the Stirling bomber, of which he was in charge. Middleton made three low level passes over the target to identify it, and on the third of these passes his aircraft was hit by heavy and sustained anti-aircraft fire – one shell exploded in the cockpit. Middleton suffered numerous greivous wounds, including shrapnel wounds to the arms, legs and body, having his right eye torn from its socket and his jaw shattered.

The same shell also wounded the second pilot and wireless operator. Middleton lost consciousness and the aircraft dived to just 800 feet before the second pilot brought it under control. They were hit by more flak as they tried to escape.

Middleton was in great pain; was barely able to see; was losing blood from wounds all over his body; and could breathe only with difficulty. He must have known that his own chances of survival were slim, but he nonetheless determined to fly his crippled aircraft home, and return his crew to safety. During the return flight he frequently said over the intercom, "I'll make the English Coast. I'll get you home".

After four hours of agony and having been further damaged by flak over France, Middleton reached the coast of England with five minutes of fuel reserves left. At this point he turned the aircraft parallel to the coast and ordered his crew to bail out. Five of his crew did so and landed safely, but his front gunner and flight engineer remained with him to try to talk him into a forced landing on the coast, something he must have known would have risked extensive civilian casualties. Eventually they too bailed out, but they did not survive the night in the English Channel. Middleton stayed with the aircraft, which crashed into the Channel. His body was washed ashore on the 1st February 1943.

Flight Sergeant Rawdon Hume Middleton was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross as well as promoted to Pilot Officer. He is buried at Beck Row, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, in England. His V C is displayed at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra. His valour earned him the first R.A.A.F. V C of World War II. The last line of his V C Citation reads: "His devotion to duty in the face of overwhelming odds is unsurpassed in the annals of the Royal Air Force".

This award was regarded after the war as possibly the finest V C of the Second World War and his courage moved an R.A.F. commentator at the time to write: "It does not seem possible that even death could have had the heart to seek out and destroy such tenacious, valiant and enduring courage...No man will know what force uplifted that tortured body in its last struggle for the lives and liberty of a faithful crew. They had urged him to abandon his ship over France while strength was still in him, but he refused to leave them prisoners. Rather, he elected, in that inner wisdom with which suffering transcends the mind, that in the balance their fit lives against his maimed one were the thing for which he must fight and plan with his last strength."

I know of Rawdon Middleton's story as I was Principal of the school named in his honour – Middleton Public School in Parkes, before I came to Mudgee.

But why such stories? Why do we recall such events on this day? It's true to say, "Lest we forget" for such was the extent of the sacrifice by so many that we don't want to forget the price they paid in order for us to have the freedom we now enjoy. But I would challenge you today that it is more than that, more than just – remembering. The challenge is to continue the legacy of "giving for others". April is an amazing time of the year when we think about this issue of "sacrifice" or "giving for others". A few weeks ago the sacrifice of a life given for all at the first Easter was remembered around the world. And now today, across this great land of ours and throughout New Zealand, as well as in Turkey & France, & my guess is, wherever there are Australians and New Zealanders, the sacrifice of lives given for others is remembered.

What do I mean when I say, "it is more than just remembering"? Let me tell you my third story. Throughout this last week, teachers across our land have been telling the story of the ANZACs to children in our schools. At Mudgee Public, one of our teachers, Mr Morley, was telling his class the story. It wasn't until after he had finished the story that he realised the impact it had, especially on one child in particular. At the end of his story, Mr Morley was asked by Zac if he could get a broom and sweep away the dirt from our school's ANZAC Rock – our school memorial. Zac was joined by Mikaela & together they cleaned the area around the rock in preparation for our school's ANZAC Day assembly.

"That's not much," I hear you say. "What's so special about a couple of kids sweeping around a memorial?"

It's not the sweeping that was special. It's not that the Memorial was clean for our Assembly that was special. What was special was that these children had heard the story of the ANZACs & they knew they had to respond; they knew they had to do something; something that would make a difference for others; something that would honour the memory of the fallen.

As we leave this ANZAC Day March & Service today, honour the memory of those who gave their all & consider how **you, & you, & you, & I** can make a difference for others because I want you to remember – **they made a difference for us.**

In conclusion I want to read a poem. Tim brought it to me earlier this week. When he came into my office he said, "Mrs O'Hara asked me to show you my poem." I'm glad Mrs O'Hara asked him to show me his poem. When I read it, I was deeply moved. Let me finish this 2010 ANZAC Day address by reading it for you. It's called, "ANZAC" & it's written by Tim Boland, who's in Year 5 at Mudgee Public School.

A.N.Z.A.C

Machine gun fire raked our men,
Cries of agony again and again.
Out came the faltering call of the commanders,
"Come on men, we can take Flanders!"
Our men surged forward with renewed hope,
But hope was not enough, because they couldn't cope.
"Retreat!" Came the cry, shattering the dark,
Our men ran back, to the boats, to embark.
But retreating had come at a high cost,
The remaining were safe, but the battle was lost.
Men died at Gallipoli, some of the best,
That's why we have A.N.Z.A.C day
LESS WE FORGET



Year 5 Student
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